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Herbert Jones: When you were born and this type thing?

Bessie McGee: I was born in Thomasville, Georgia, November 25, 1893.

HJ: And do you remember what year you came to Tampa?

BM: 1910.

HJ: Can you tell me anything, us anything about World War I, how life was in Tampa for blacks during World War I?

BM: Well, this is a ring was given to me World War I, the fellow I was going with then give me that when he was leaving; it's my birthstone.

HJ: Oh, that's beautiful.

BM: Cause I worn it in two, two or three times.

HJ: How was life in Tampa?

BM: Well, in Tampa it was just glory to me, because I came here from a small town, Bainbridge, Georgia, a very small town. You can imagine what Tampa was to me then, but it wasn't nothing like it is now. Because when I came here, I came on the train and they had a depot like you have in Georgia, and it wasn't as good as the one that I left in Georgia; it was on the corner of Polk [Street] and Franklin [Street] in Tampa, that's where I got off the train there at the depot. And Tampa was kind of poor then; it's another Tampa now, from what it was when I came here.

HJ: How old were you when you came here?

BM: I had my eighteenth birthday here, but I came here I guess around about seventeen or near eighteen, cause I had my eighteenth birthday here.

HJ: Okay, when you came, what type of work were blacks doing?

BM: Well, the blacks were doing mostly anything they could get then, and a lot of them was working in the cigar factory.

HJ: Did you work in the cigar factory?

BM: Uh huh.

HJ: How much were you making when you started working in the cigar factory?

BM: Oh, well, I'll make twelve dollars some weeks and when I learned, why then it came up to eighteen dollars a week and of course that was something to a \$1.25 a week and a \$1.50 what I was getting in Georgia.

HJ: Were a lot of blacks employed there?

BM: Yeah, quite a few, mostly Cubans and Italians—I'll say Latin people.

HJ: What year was it that you started working where you were working?

BM: Oh, around about eleven, 1911.

HJ: Okay, how was the housing conditions for blacks; where did the blacks basically live?

BM: Well, they lived most everywhere, but among the whites then. When I first came here I was living, my mother was living on the corner of [North] Boulevard and Laurel [Street].

HJ: Were those streets named then—those streets had names like that when y'all came here?

BM: Uh huh, when I came—yeah, we were living right on the corner of Boulevard and Laurel.

HJ: In a house?

BM: Oh, yeah, a pretty good house, but wasn't no bathroom. And we didn't have running water—I mean a hot and cold, we didn't have that—and it was an Italian house, and most

of our neighbors was Italians.

HJ: Did you have any problems with them?

BM: Oh, no, they were very nice people. When they were around they were better than our people, cause they don't tend your business and please don't you tend to theirs, but they were very nice people.

HJ: Do you remember when Dr. Benjamin Mays was here working with the Urban League?

BM: Doctor who?

HJ: Mays, Benjamin Mays, cause that was around 1922, somewhere like that.

BM: (inaudible) I just do remember, but not much about it.

HJ: Okay, what about the streetcars?

BM: (inaudible) Oh, the streetcars, they was nice long green ones, then.

HJ: And how much did you have to pay to ride on them?

BM: I think they were five or ten cent.

HJ: And you had to sit at the back?

BM: Sat in the back, by all means; you get to far in front, they ask you to go in the back.

HJ: Okay, can you tell me anything about the land boom here in Tampa, when land was plentiful and folks was buying up land and stuff like that; do you remember that?

BM: I just do remember that long at that time, but in the later years I ah—I help name—oh, not Lincoln Garden, the other one.

HJ: Carver City?

BM: Uh huh, but I had too much name, I named it George Carver, but I got something. They's giving prizes and I was the twelfth one that sent in a name and I think I was the second or third that sent in that. I had the Carver right, but I put a little too much to it and they had, they was giving Pyrex dishes and I got there too late; it was the Urban League on Lamar [Avenue] then. I got there too late and they gave me a razor set and I was working at Saint Joseph [Hospital], so (inaudible), back to the hospital and showed it and then a man brought it, so I was lucky about that.

HJ: What type of lifestyle did blacks have in early Tampa, like when you first came in

1911, what did y'all do for entertainment, like you know did you go dances, parties?

BM: Yeah, we went to dances and parties. And then we would give parties on Saturday nights, we give church parties to raise money, like the churches have—we would raise our money that way.

HJ: When you first came here, what church did you go to?

BM: Oh, I went to Beulah [Baptist Church], I was here—

HJ: Are you still at Beulah?

BM: Yeah, I done helped 'em build two churches.

HJ: Well I done seen you there, I've sung at Beulah a lot of times, with from USF [University of South Florida].

BM: Well I helped 'em build two churches, cause when I joined we was at Longshoremen [Longshoremen's Hall] then, that's where it was. And it took me two years to make up my mind whether to join Beulah or Bethel [Baptist Church]. So I thought about—well, when I was converted in Bainbridge, Georgia, it was the First Baptist Church, so I join Beulah and I've been there ever since.

HJ: Okay, so you were here when Beulah had that bust right, when they broke up and went different ways, cause Beulah came from another church right, before?

BM: I don't know, but Beulah has plenty children—what I mean by that is you know they moved out and started another church.

HJ: Yeah, that's what I was talking about. Where did they move out from, what church did they move out from?

BM: They moved out from Beulah, it was St. John [Progressive Missionary Baptist Church].

HJ: Oh these churches branched out from Beulah into others?

BM: Beulah, I said that our churches St. John, New Hope [Missionary Baptist Church], New Salem [Missionary Baptist Church] in Hyde Park.

HJ: Why did the people want to branch out, do you know why?

BM: Oh, well, things went wrong and they wasn't satisfied. Greater Bethel [Baptist Church] is one of our children, and Beulah was 113 years old last month.

HJ: What about the schools, how were the schools in Tampa, during the early '30s as far

back as you can remember?

BM: I don't remember so well, but I remember I went to Meacham [Elementary School], and Miss Tina [Christina Meacham] was teaching there and I went three weeks and I didn't like her. And so then I just stopped and went to work.

HJ: Okay, what about the police brutality here, were the policemen real cruel to black folks?

BM: Well, Mr. Davis and I can't think of the other one's name; they were right cruel to the people on Central [Avenue].

HJ: If you went on Central they didn't bother with you too much?

BM: Oh, yeah, they bother you. If they had to; they didn't bother you if you behaved yourself.

HJ: When you first came here in 1910, did they have a Central then—Central Avenue, was there a Central Avenue then?

BM: Yeah.

HJ: What was on there then?

BM: More than there is now. Oh, boy, that was our street—yeah, there was some good times back then. I mean you wasn't afraid that; you just had a nice time. And on Sundays, on Sundays—we wasn't going on Sunday afternoon cause Sunday you had to go to church in the morning, but on Sunday afternoon you would just enjoy walking on Central—it was on Central and Scott [Street]—and stand up and look at people pass. Or go over there in Webb Drugstore—it wasn't Webb then, it was something else, I can't remember—and sit down and look at the people pass. And then we use to go out to Palmetto Beach, out there, cause they had a dance and everything out there. Then we use to go on Central to a theatre; was then Anderson, now the Anderson Building. But we just had a good time long in that time, and especially for me, cause see, I was from a small town. And of course it was just—oh, I thought I was something when I could go about in different places to go to theaters.

HJ: Do you remember anything about the Tampa riots in the forties [1940s]; there was a big riot against some blacks and whites in the forties [1940s], and they called it the Tampa Riots?

BM: Now part of the time I was in Sarasota working. In the forties [1940s], I think I was here but I don't remember a riot, I can't place it. That could have been in Sarasota, but you ain't talking about the time when Reverend [A. Leon] Lowry had the—

HJ: No, that was in the late fifties [1950s].

BM: I can't think of very much to help y'all, I'm sorry; old and forgetful now, honey.

HJ: No, you're doing okay. Can you tell me like during World War I, you got the ring from your boyfriend. Okay, was he from Tampa—this guy was from Tampa, and he went to fight in World War I, right? Okay, so what type of work were you doing then?

BM: I mostly did maid. I worked in the cigar factory for a long time, then I got mad cause they strike too much. One year just 'bout three weeks to Christmas, I had things put up in Ybor City, and things put up on Franklin [Street], and they had a strike. Then I had to go to work in service, and I didn't like that so much. So that's when I quit working in the factory after working in service.

HJ: You were working at the cigar factory during the time of World War I, were you not? Was this after was after World War I or during World War I you were doing the service work?

BM: I was doing the service work.

HJ: Were jobs hard to find during World War I?

BM: I don't think so. I worked for a lady—she was from Alabama—and I worked for them. And anytime there was a crowd going off for the service, honey, she had to let me off, cause I had to go the station and see 'em off. I had—and then go back and fix dinner, but I had to see those boys off.

HJ: You had to go?

BM: Oh, I had to go, you swear I was going to the [United States] Army.

HJ: Why did you have to go?

BM: I don't know; it was just one of those things. I had to go.

HJ: Would there be other people down there too?

BM: Oh, like this, and they were crying and falling out. I had to go. Well, this is a crowd going off, I know you are going, I wanted to say you lucky I came at all.

HJ: So how long it would take you before they would go? How long would you have to take off from work?

BM: I don't—whatever time they was going.

HJ: She wouldn't say nothing?

BM: Uh-uh; they knowed, honey—see, they seen the paper before I did, so they know they either had to go out to dinner or fix it.

HJ: Or wait until you come back?

BM: They'll fix or either they'll go out to dinner.

HJ: Doing the time when you were young and black folks got sick, where did they go to get help, medical help when they were sick?

BM: Well, at that time I didn't know nowhere but to Clara Frye [Hospital], and it was on Lamar then and they closed the poor county.

HJ: How was the facilities there, and the help at Clara Frye?

BM: It was nice, I guess, at some point, but I didn't get to go there. But it was all we had, that and the county.

HJ: Though they would let you go to the county for help? You had your separate sides, of course, the blacks from the white?

BM: I guess, cause I didn't go there. In later years they had the County Hospital and right down the road was the Welfare.

HJ: Well, just tell us some things in general that y'all use, that you just did when you coming up in Tampa, just anything.

BM: I didn't come, I wasn't raised in Tampa.

HJ: I mean from the time you came here, from 18 ah—what did you do, some of the things that you did, and some of the things that black folks did here, that you can remember?

BM: I just can't remember too much about it. I know we worked some in the factories, some doing house work, some doing laundry work. My mother did laundry work.

HJ: Do you know how much she was making?

BM: No, I don't. I know one job I was on, I made \$3.50.

HJ: A week?

BM: Course, that was heaven as to what I had left.

HJ: And how much would your rent be and stuff like that?

BM: Oh that was cheap, \$1.75 or \$2 a week.

HJ: Food was very cheap?

BM: Food was cheap.

HJ: Did y'all ever have the twentieth—what is that thing?—the twentieth of May celebration here in Tampa with blacks, did blacks ever celebrate that day?¹

BM: I don't remember 'em celebrating that day like we did in Georgia.

HJ: What about Gas—when the fair came to town, did y'all do anything during that time?

BM: No, we weren't in that. But in later years when my brothers got grown, they had them maybe serving the crew—Gasparilla crew—they be serving and things, two of my brothers.

HJ: What about—did you ever run into any problems when you were working in the factories, like with the white workers; did they treat the black workers different?

BM: No, I didn't never have no problem. They were mostly Latin people working at times; sometime you would have trouble with your foreman. Especially when he couldn't speak English and you couldn't speak Italian or Spanish.

HJ: Wasn't no problem with them calling you nigger?

BM: No, uh-uh.

HJ: What about when you was working in service, were any of the families extremely harsh or slave driver type?

BM: No, no. And I worked in one family eighteen years, and I didn't have no trouble out of them, and they had three girls and I married all of them off, married the oldest one off twice. I didn't have no problem. Only I get tired.

HJ: Did you ever hear from any of the men that they were having problems down at the docks, you know with the white men, maybe running them away from the docks or something?

BM: No, my husband, my first husband work down there and the only complaint he had [was] they wasn't working regularly, just when the ships come in. It made it kind of tough you know. But if they had problem we didn't bring them home, you know how some of you men do here alone, bring some your troubles home. But I can say I've seen Tampa, cause some places in here I don't know myself. It really has built up since 1910, since I've been here. I hardly know where I use to live.

¹ May 20 is Emancipation Day, celebrating the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation in Florida.

HJ: You remember the address, but not how to find it?

BM: Yeah. Now one place I lived—well, two places—they have torn the houses down. Now when I last—when I use to live on Highland [Avenue]—I don't know whether y'all know where that is, up between Seventh [Avenue] and over—all those big two story houses up, torn down now. And the last place I lived there was on Estelle [Street] and Ashley [Street], and that's where the City Hall or City Jail was. (inaudible) And we had to move out, they moved us out.

HJ: Do you remember the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or when they first came to town?

BM: No. I can't remember when first came to town, but I can remember I was a member once.

HJ: Did the soldiers ever talk about the problems they had in serving the Army—like your boyfriend, did he ever write you and tell you anything about what was happening to him in the Army, and stuff like that?

BM: Uh-uh, he come here and a while and died. I think he drink too much.

HJ: So do you have any other sisters and brothers living?

BM: Oh, yeah, I got one live out on North East Bay [Street] and she lives in the family home; then I got one live on Twenty-First [Street] right off of Columbus Drive.

HJ: And how old are they?

BM: I can't keep up with them numbers, but Baby was the one that live on Busch [Boulevard] and Twenty-First [Street].

HJ: And how old is she?

BM: I'm 20 years older than she is, so I'll be eighty-five in November and she'll be sixty-five—now I am right, I'm twenty years older. See, in January she'll be sixty-five.

HJ: Okay, we can talk to her; was she born in Tampa?

BM: No—yeah, she was born, but I don't know if she know anything.

HJ: She might know something if she's sixty-five and you're older.

BM: She will be sixty-five in January.

HJ: And how old was your—you said you had a brother living somewhere?

BM: No, honey.

HJ: Just two sisters?

BM: My brothers wasn't living, but I got another sister.

HJ: What's her name?

BM: Geneva Vann, she live in Belmont Heights.

HJ: What's her address or her phone number that I can call her?

BM: Twenty and—which you want?

HJ: Give me her phone number then, I can call her and get an interview with her.

BM: All right, 232-6173, Geneva Vann.

HJ: And your younger sister, what's her name?

BM: Virda Lee Currey, Virda.

HJ: Virda.

BM: Did you put a V there?

HJ: Uh huh, what was the last name?

BM: Virda Lee Currey, last name is Currey.

HJ: And her phone number?

BM: Her phone is 248-3570.

HJ: And you know if you talk to them, tell them that I'll be calling to do an interview, cause they probably could give me some insight to, you know, maybe some of the things that you have forgotten, they probably could pick them up.

BM: You want me to call them.

HJ: Yeah, you can call them and I will call them also, see if I can get their addresses, and when I can come by to visit them.

BM: Cause I owe both of 'em a call. Cause when they call me today, somebody came in and I promise to call 'em back and I haven't.

HJ: So is there anything else you want to share with us today, or that can remember that you haven't shared?

BM: I can't remember, I guess when y'all leave then I'll remember.

HJ: Okay, if you should then I'll give you—

end of interview